Wrestling Observer Newsletter

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I used to think there were very few foolproof angles in wrestling. That's because I didn't really comprehend the literal meaning of the term "foolproof."

The truth is, there are none. The introduction of Bill Goldberg to WWE proved that. The key word, again, is "foolproof." The problem with the word is underestimating just how foolish some people can be.

The role of creative in pro wrestling is to come up with ways and ideas to make fans more interested in seeing the next big wrestling match. It is very rare when something is handed to the promoter like a gift that says, "You can now print money."

It happens every now and then. Usually it's during a long-time promotional war that ends, which enables the match fans had thought about and dreamed about (hence the term "dream match") to happen. The interviews are simple. You just have to go with what the fans are already thinking, hype it a little, and they'll come because it's already been hyped, in some cases for years, in their own minds.

New Japan made its reputation on providing those matches, which would be Antonio Inoki against a guy people thought he'd never be in the ring with. While the all-time dream match, Inoki vs. Giant Baba, never did take place due to both hating each other and not working together, Inoki had more than his share. The first big one was March 19, 1974. Inoki was New Japan's big star, Baba was All Japan's big star, and the third big star was Shozo "Strong" Kobayashi, of the AWA affiliated International Wrestling Enterprises, who held their International championship and defended it against the AWA's biggest names who would tour. Kobayashi was lured away by New Japan, and it led not only to New Japan's first-ever sellout of Budokan Hall, but a television match that is remembered to this day. That's not an exaggeration, since it was just recently featured on the TV show twice this year. Later, when the IWE folded, its biggest star, Rusher Kimura, had a lucrative feud with Inoki. Inoki had two other similar angles handed to him that didn't do nearly as well.

In 1984, several New Japan wrestlers left the company when the company's long-time CEO, Hisashi Shinma, after being kicked out in an embezzlement scandal, formed a new promotion called the UWF. At the time, Akira Maeda was being groomed by the company to be Inoki's replacement when Inoki, then 40, would step down, with the feeling long-time understudy Tatsumi Fujinami lacked the charisma to carry the company. By late 1984, the wrestlers had taken UWF in a different direction, and Shinma was booted out of the company he formed. Their idea was to do a realistic style, which is now called worked shoot. At the time, most fans believed it simply to be pro wrestling without predetermined finishes (even though in fact, the finishes were predetermined). Maeda continually knocked New Japan and pro wrestling in general for being fake. The group became a cult favorite in Tokyo, but did not draw well on the road, and by the end of 1985, was dead. The wrestlers all returned to New Japan in 1986, to create a hot feud. Ironically, the biggest money match, Inoki vs. Maeda, never took place because neither would agree to put the other over. It was that same mentality that destroyed a feud with previous year with Inoki vs. Bruiser Brody, another dream match as Brody was a legend who hadn't lost in years in All Japan, who quit the company. While the first two dream matches were major TV ratings successes, after inconclusive finishes, again because both refused to do the first job and neither trusted the other, nor based on their reps, should they have, interest waned greatly by the time they did the third match.

In the U.S. regional days, such matches were more difficult. There was no national television, and in most areas, there was only one promotion running. After the promotional war in Detroit, they did do a three-match series with The Sheik vs. Dick the Bruiser, where the winner of the promotional war also won the series. Montreal did similar matches when its early 70s promotional war ended, and the battle of champions drew near record business. There were others, such as San Francisco, when the top 60s star, Ray Stevens, was brought back to face the top 70s star, Pat Patterson, although the two had a memorable feud in the area years ago, after splitting up their tag team. New York had the Bruno Sammartino vs. Pedro Morales match. Both did well, but neither did the record business expected. In both cases, the problem was that in the early 70s of babyface vs. heel, there was a reason for that formula. Even the dream match of face vs. face had a hard time doing big business.

In the modern era, the most notable program that fit into this category was Hulk Hogan vs. Ric Flair. This had some incredible potential, because by the time the matches took place in late 1991, the thing had been simmering for more than seven years, since each man was their company's standard-bearer dating back to the war of 84. After a contract dispute, Jim Herd fired Flair before Flair dropped the WCW (and NWA) world championship in the ring. McMahon was handed the elusive title unification match, which at that point in time, was a real big deal because championships hadn't been bastardized that badly. It's also considered, in hindsight, a botched program.

There have been numerous examples in recent years in Japan. Largely due to business weakening, the companies have broken down barriers and several matches that fit that description have taken place, most notable being the Toshiaki Kawada (as All Japan's top star) vs. Kensuke Sasaki (New Japan's IWGP champion) match on October 9, 2000 at the Tokyo Dome. Although the All Japan vs. New Japan feud ultimately was disappointing, the atmosphere at that match, and at the rematch three months later, was incredible. What was also notable about that program is that the match was on a New Japan show, and New

Japan's world champion was in the ring with a wrestler from the long-time rival company, and New Japan's wrestler went down clean for the finish. It's actually the most logical finish for doing such a program, but historically, what has happened over the past two years in WWE is actually usually how things work out. It's the old Jim Crockett Promotions vs. Mid South deal, where after the acquisition, instead of building up a team vs. team angle which can draw legitimate heat, the most important thing is for the booker to make sure that the company that survived is proven to have always been the better one. Ultimately, that proof usually results in driving the fans of the other group away from pro wrestling, often never coming back.

Realistically, while Crockett vs. Mid South fits the bill, and could have been done effectively, at least for a little while, the dynamics weren't there for record business like they were over the past few years. The wrestlers who had the most history on top of Mid South were Jim Duggan and Ted DiBiase, and both were in the WWF (not that had DiBiase stayed, things would have wound up differently). They could have done a Flair vs. Steve Williams program, but it wouldn't have been that successful. Williams was missing something for the U.S. He was a tough, believable guy, but didn't have a superstar look and wasn't a good interview. He was successful, particularly in Oklahoma, because he was a college football and wrestling star that everyone there knew was real. That didn't carry over nationally.

No discussion of this, historically, would be complete without a few other famous matches. Ed "Strangler" Lewis had two such dream matches, one against Joe Stecher, his rival as the biggest star in the 20s. Because they worked for rival promotions for much of the time, and there were other reasons as well, the two didn't wrestle each other for more than seven years. When the match finally took place in St. Louis in 1928, the buzz in the industry was that it would be a shooting match, since they were the top stars from rival companies, and on rare occasions shoots have taken place where each side picked its top star. Not only were they the top stars, but if they weren't the top two shooters of the era, at least reputation had them pretty close. As it turned out, Stecher was looking for a big payoff to get out of the business, and agreed to do business, dropping the world title back to Lewis. The most successful, one that was up until that point of time the most successful money drawing feud in history, was New Japan vs. UWFI in 1995-96. Nobuhiko Takada was world champion of the UWFI, wearing the old NWA title belt given to him by Lou Thesz. A few years earlier, in a grandstand angle out of the early century thought up by Thesz, challenged all the existing world champions to a match to determine the real champion. At the time, most in Japan were kind of embarrassed by UWFI doing something so unprofessional, but they got away without much criticism because Thesz was like a wrestling god and could get away with such conduct that most others would be knocked for. As it turned out, the company made a huge money deal at the time with Vader, who was WCW champion. While it was not billed as a unification match, the illusion was there, and in Takada's biggest moment, he arm barred Vader before as sellout 46,148 fans at Jingu Stadium in Tokyo in a classic match. They ended up doing a three-match series, with Vader winning the second. By the time they had the third meeting, nobody cared, and it only drew 6,000 paid in Nagoya. But this set the stage for the biggest match ever of this type, when Takada (who no longer had the belt as Thesz, since UWFI was in financial disarray, owed him money, and he went home with his belt) faced IWGP champ Keiji Muto.

The New Japan vs. UWFI program in 1995-96 was the program that Eric Bischoff saw in its latter stages attending a sold out Tokyo Dome show, and led to the WCW vs. NWO angle, which, because it lasted longer, eclipsed New Japan vs. UWFI as the biggest money angle up to that point in time in wrestling history.

The angle was simple. UWFI was financially destitute and came to New Japan to do business and a Tokyo Dome show was set up pitting the two champions against one another on October 9, 1995. The two never touched before the match, which sold out the Dome weeks in advance and destroyed all business records at the time with a $6.1 million gate. The only tease was a match two weeks earlier on a New Japan show where New Japan's booker and top traditional star, Riki Choshu, took a prelim kid as his tag team partner (Yuji Nagata), to face supposed UWFI shooters Yoji Anjo & Tatsuo Nakano. The match had super heat and the key was it was worked so stiff that Nagata's right eye was shut by a kick from Anjo, and Choshu and Nagata both potatoed Anjo as per the pre-match agreement, shutting his eyes and bruising his face. It was the legitimately brutality that gave the feud a real aura, and led to record business. Still, it was only a short-term success. New Japan insisted on dominating the feud, much as WWF did in 2001, and for all the same reasons, because fans had compared the two for years and a lot of things had been said. Instead of making money, this was about proving a point. In hindsight, the point was that the business is booked for ego and not money. New Japan won six out of the first nine matches (and it would have been seven out of nine had Jushin Liger not insisted on losing his match to Naoki Sano, now Takuma Sano, because he felt it would be best for business). This included the big one ,when Muto beat the so-called submission master, Takada, by submission with a figure four leglock. The match was influential stylistically, since the figure four, which had been dead in Japan, was brought back as a finisher, and it was the match that also popularized the dragon screw legwhip, which became one of the hot moves to this day. Actually, this feud probably was foolproof, because even with the one-sided booking, Takada drew two more Dome sellouts. The second one was when he got his win back from Muto and captured the IWGP title, and the third when he lost the belt to Shinya Hashimoto. The feud also drew packed houses in the country's largest arenas in between..

Up until 2001, most considered the most botched angle, the Hogan vs. Flair angle, which we'll get into in detail in a future WWE history story. But the match drew some excellent crowds early on, but for many reasons, never lived up to expectations. It was such that three years later, when it was rekindled, this time when Hogan joined WCW, it was promoted far more effectively and actually billed as the first time the two had ever met, even though they had met roughly 40 times in singles matches a few years earlier.

As the wrestling war heated up between WWF and WCW, there was raiding back-and-forth. There is little doubt WCW did better in creating new dream matches out of old ones, whether it be Hogan against people like Vader, Roddy Piper, Flair and Sting, playing off years of politics that had prevent such matches from taking place. WWF was never good at the angles handed to them. When former WWF stars went to WCW, they were programed for maximum effectiveness, some would say almost too strong. When people went in the other direction, most notably Chris Jericho, Big Show (a former WCW champion) and Chris Benoit (who actually won the WCW title on his last day in the company, giving WWF, like with Flair, the guy who fans considered the real WCW champion), they did everything to make sure not to get the most effectiveness out of it. Big Show was jobbed right away to Austin. Jericho, who was as big a star on his first Raw appearance as he would ever be, had to work his way up. Benoit, who was a bigger star in his first weeks in WWF than he ever was at any point in his career, immediately jobbed in a singles match to HHH, ruining what was an easy and obvious angle.

WCW's biggest blunder was when McMahon handed them an angle far hotter than anything WCW had ever handed McMahon, even when Flair went over and the biggest match in wrestling was put on a silver platter for McMahon to drop. Bret Hart came over after the Survivor Series in 1997, in everyone's mind as the real WWF champion. The controversy over the match made him, in his jump, a far bigger star than he had ever been, and there were many who in the summer of 1996 thought him to already be the most valuable star in the game. There were a slew of potential big matches, as WCW was knee deep in headliners, but somehow all except the early matches with Flair, had far more anticipation before Hart appeared on WCW television and was mishandled.

Had Bill Goldberg been on the WWF roster in the summer of 2001, a match with Rock would have done 750,000 buys on PPV, conservatively, with no television build-up. With a botched build-up, a WCW & ECW vs. WWF ten-man tag did 726,400 buys. Goldberg vs. Steve Austin, had Austin not been turned, would have done far more, since Austin was a much bigger PPV draw at the time than Rock, and Austin vs. Goldberg was really the "dream match" everyone talked about when the war was at its most heated.

Business is far worse today. Goldberg vs. Rock would have still done well in excess of 550,000 buys last summer, because Rock did 455,000 against an unproven Brock Lesnar, who really only became a star due to the program (and in hindsight, his specialness was killed right after winning the title from Rock when they split the title into two, thus instead of having one belt that meant something, they had two belts that meant nothing). Timing is everything and they missed the peak. Still, had Goldberg never appeared on television and there had been an aura of mystery, far more people would be buying the PPV on Sunday than whatever number it turns out to be. WWE creative over the past two years now has the dubious distinction of ruining more slam dunk angles than perhaps every promotion in history combined.

They blew the original WCW Invasion, which even with WCW presented as inferior, the interest was such that it still drew the most buys on PPV for any pro wrestling show in history that wasn't called Wrestlemania. They had an easy year with that, and then could have fired the ECW gun, which wouldn't have done the initial money, but in the long-run had the potential to be even more emotional, and carry things for months. Putting Shane McMahon in charge of WCW, and even worse, Stephanie in charge of ECW, completely destroyed the entire aura of what they were trying to present, and ended up running millions of wrestling fans off in the process. I can remember laughing at the absolute stupidity of WCW for putting the first Hogan-Goldberg match on free television when it would have been one of the biggest PPV matches ever, because they were so obsessed with winning a week of ratings that they pissed away $7 million in profits. Almost as funny was after the success visually of the first, never doing a rematch because of how messed up the egos had become. But when Eric Bischoff came on Nitro and hugged Vince McMahon, that was even dumber. At least there is an argument that all of America saw Goldberg's shining moment and it made him a bigger star for it, and had it been followed up right, that even could be true. The only argument for Bischoff not feuding with McMahon was to swerve the audience. There is nothing more pathetic than the head of a company in a con man business, who only ends up conning himself out of money that he could have literally printed.

WWE's handling of Goldberg on 4/21 in Atlanta was actually quite familiar to anyone who followed WCW. They saw it every time Ric Flair wrestled in the Carolinas. And check those gate receipts for return business in those cities while Bischoff was having his fun. Of course, this is lost on these in WWE who knew so much more than those in charge of WCW that they've actually done a worse job. One year from now, before Wrestlemania, when Goldberg was fully established in WWE rings, what happened on that night would have been a great heat angle. An angle that would have been needed to spark business with something new. The point they missed was Goldberg first had to be established in their ring as something special. The key to making a superstar, and this is not difficult because there are only examples everywhere, is have them come out on top in situation after situation where it appeared they had no chance to come out on top. No different than John Wayne or campy superhero TV shows. Once fans have gotten an emotional bond, believing that babyface is worth supporting, at that point he can get screwed in the right way and people, already behind him, get outraged and emotionally charged enough to buy tickets to see him avenge that wrong. If you screw the star before making the star, he's not going to be a star.

But in his first weeks on WWE television, the production crew did their job. They created a video, played over and over, which told people Goldberg was special. But the creative side ruined all those efforts, creating angles to prove that Goldberg is nothing worth people investing in. And it's not hard to do that, being that people have tuned out in droves after being teased that this guy and that guy were going to get a chance, only to have the rug pulled out from under them, and people stopped caring about them.

Goldberg, the one where the book was already written on how to make it work, was made a joke. Nobody likes incompetent babyfaces, proven by how the crowd turned for Rock by the end of the night. Goldberg first got rock bottomed. He should have popped right up, and Rock should have ran. When he was put in a scene to get revenge, that required intensity, Goldberg did a slow jog. He wasn't an unstoppable animal. His WCW character that made him one of the hottest new stars the industry had ever seen. He was just a guy doing a bad job of chasing someone in a fake wrestling angle. Then, his car blew its transmission. Okay, things happen on live TV. Then, he came back later in the show for revenge, and was made a fool out of for the third time, worn out with chair shots. And the show ended with no intense interview vowing revenge, delivered by someone who made you, even though you knew better, believe it.

Ever since late 2000, when Chris Kreski left to write heavily criticized baseball books and was replaced as head writer by Stephanie McMahon, angles have fallen apart on a regular basis. It started with the HHH-Kurt Angle-Stephanie love triangle, one of the best created and received angles in years, which made one of only two near superstars the company has truly created in a three year period. It was aborted because "it wouldn't be right for a kick ass guy like HHH to lose the girl." That's carny for, this is a company that has been booked purely for ego, which is actually the rule and not the exception in wrestling, but the other rule that has followed it in the past 20 years is those tactics wind up with the company collapsing. In the process, the same thing has happened here. Even with more than two years of evidence, things have gotten worse. And like with Jim Crockett in 1988 and Eric Bischoff in 1999, instead of getting to the root of the cancer, while any fan with even half a sense as to the industry can see in neon signs, the people in charge knew that their fan base didn't get it. There is a very simple formula. When they stop buying tickets, you have to re-evaluate your direction. When they stop watching free television, it is too late, because you've lost them. About seven million of them to be exact. And like those periods, history is repeating itself.

We can now watch year three of the decline of the greatest wrestling empire ever built right before our eyes. But it's far sadder this time. For one, we just saw an empire that should have been around forever collapse in similar fashion, and cease to exist exactly three years after the most successful period for any U.S. company up to that point in history. And we saw it happen the same way. Like in 1988 and 1999, and since 2001, nearly everyone who followed the business closely saw it coming loud and clear. But this one was far worse. In 1988, Jim Crockett Promotions was outmaneuvered in a business sense, and had largely used the same talent on top for so long that the product was stale. In 1999, the company that lived through the creation of dream match scenarios, fell victim to stale talent on top and not planning for its future. In both cases, it would have taken a very bright creative person and an ability to create new talent that didn't appear to be there, to really turn it around. They weren't lost causes, but it wouldn't have been easy.

They weren't handed angles that were foolproof. In that way, the people in charge at WWE are even less competent. Linda McMahon, at recent stockholders meetings, has been met with the comparison she hates, with WCW. A few months from now, the people in charge are going to have to look themselves in the mirror and realize that they were handed more business on a silver platter than any wrestling company in history. They didn't botch the arrival of Bret Hart, which they can laugh at years later in attempts to rewrite history. They botched five arrivals of Bret Hart. As I've written before, I'm not in the writing meetings, and I do know the game the writers have to play. This is not necessarily a knock at any person, although just as Vince McMahon deserved credit for the success, I guess the buck does stop with him. WCW created more, and had less handed to them, and they are considered the epitome of the worst run organization in modern times.

From the outside, it appears the people in charge are so isolated from the real world that they've become the most pathetic kind of junkies. Junkies to the pop, the swerve and to the ego that if they didn't create it, it must not be good, and that somehow people with the right family ties inherit a birthright to be wrestling celebrities. There's a graveyard of people just like this, because they also didn't learn the lessons of history. But nobody handed them the right to print money on a silver platter.